

## Letters to the Editor

☐ Sirs:

The following is in reference to a recent paper in *Rapa Nui Journal*, Vol. 10 (1) titled "When the Earth Trembled, The Statues Fell" by Edwards, Marchetti, Dominichetti and Gonz  les-Ferr  n. As always happens with topics and publications on Isla de Pascua, it is very difficult not to look at such assumptions in a slightly different manner than that which was presented by the authors. With relation to that well-presented work, I beg to add some personal comments from the point of view of a simple lover—enamored of things about our beloved Rapa Nui. In particular, I want to draw attention to those parts noted below.

On page 14, "When did the Statues Fall?" the argument of the authors as to the possibility of the occurrence of earthquakes prior to the arrival of Roggeveen in 1722 is reasonable, for Roggeveen knew nothing of it, nor was it noted by other visitors who navigated along the coast of Rapa Nui. No one mentioned seeing Ahu Tongariki with its 250 meter wall and 15 *moai*, a construction that surely would have been noted, especially by sailors. Clearly, these *moai* had fallen before 1722 and could serve well to verify the argument of the authors who point out the possibility that the destruction of Tongariki's *ahu* was the result of an earthquake on the island.

In the same way, given this point of consideration, it is not improbable that the same thing happened in past times with *moai* on other *ahu* of the island.

The other alternative for the destruction of Tongariki's *moai* is the possibility that it's destruction resulted from wars between the residents of Tongariki and rival tribes. This type of destruction comes to us through oral traditions, where combat between diverse tribes is spoken of, along with the tearing down of *moai* from *ahu* in conquered territory. It is an hypothesis that stands out among others in the past history of Rapa Nui.

But a little further on, the authors state: "After a period of seismic activity in which the majority, if not all, of the statues erected on ceremonial centers toppled..." This, to us, seems too strong an affirmation and cannot be possible. Let us examine this theory.

For example, in relation to Ahu Vaihu (Hanga Tee), on 3 January 1872, the future poet, Pierre Loti, arrived aboard the French frigate, *La Flore*. His drawings are well known and one, dated 6 January, shows natives throwing down statues at this *ahu*. This may be evidence that, in 1872, fallen *moai* already existed at this *ahu*. But in his diary Loti clarified that his drawing was only speculation on the activities of past times, and was based upon stories told him by the Rapanui while he was at that moment in Vaihu.

Or it is not improbable that some of Vaihu's *moai* fell by themselves as a direct consequence of an earthquake (possibly the same one that affected Tongariki). But for the story told us by Loti, and based upon traditions, there is equal weight for the destruction of some *moai* at Vaihu by direct interference of the ancient Rapanui.

And this, in our view, could signify that the same happened at other *ahu* of the island, where not all *moai* fell by themselves due to seismic perturbations, and more, that the rest (equal to what happened at Vaihu) were thrown down by enemy action toward vanquished opponents during a period of intense tribal warfare. It is true, as said by the authors, that traditional stories indicate the occurrence of earthquakes in the past, but also it is true that there are traditional legends about the existence of those tribal wars. And it is this that does not seem to be strong affirmation that, as a consequence of earthquakes "...the majority, if not all, of the statues erected in ceremonial centers toppled..."

On the same page, the authors state: "...or they might experiment with new configurations such as the two kneeling statues at Rano Raraku, for that could have been looked upon as being more stable." I only know of one kneeling statue,<sup>1</sup> here mentioned by the authors, the *moai* Tuku Turi. Thanks to the activities of the Norwegian Expedition of 1955-56, we are able to see its details and different characteristics, possibly the evolution of styles in sculptural art between distinct villages. It does not seem very probable that the sculptors of *moai* abandoned their usual style and techniques and instantly opted for the Tuku Turi style, if the only reason was to obtain more stability for their statues in the face of possible earthquakes.

It is usually recognized that ancient islanders were very productive and that their techniques are to this day considered brilliant, given the available means at their disposal. As stated by the authors, the ancient islanders knew the possibility of earthquakes that could affect the island. But despite this, they always made new *moai*.

And then the authors theorize that "If the duration of one of these seismic cycles lasted over a period of several years, most probably the activities of statue building in the quarries of Rano Raraku would be abandoned." In the same manner, we could propose the following theory: in any certain moment, the *moai* were being carved more rapidly than it was possible to transport them to their respective *ahu*. For this reason, the quantity of *moai* already carved grew larger at the base of Rano Raraku.

Now, let us consider the known capacity of the ancient Rapanui; it is perfectly reasonable to think that they became aware of the futility of making new statues because so many were already prepared for future use, and it is next to impossible to transport them to their *ahu*.

It could be that the real proof of that was the irremediable loss of the sources of the main material that permitted workers to move the *moai*, such as the traditional theory of loss of trees necessary to move them to their final destination.

And returning to the hypothesis of stylistic change from traditional to the style of Tuku Turi, there are questions to consider: what is the probable age of Tuku Turi? Was it sculpted in an earlier period than that of the traditional *moai*? For me, I would like very much to know of more specialized studies.

In another part of the publication, it is mentioned 'in passing' the possibility that the *moai* in transit to their *ahu* also fell due to earthquake action since these *moai* actually

fell directly on the road.

If it is true, as the authors propose, that the *moai* fell from the *ahu* due to instability during earthquakes, it is equally true that must have fallen while they were being moved on the roads from the quarry. Stability is not very great for the statues due to the center of gravity. Always there was the possibility of falling but this would be more extreme during seismic waves.

*Models of Moai stability.* This part is particularly technical and I do not have sufficient knowledge to analyze the details, but I would like to know more. In any case it is evident that the authors worked long and hard on many details and calculations and this is more than convincing to prove their hypothesis to us.

In conclusion, from what I am able to understand from the reading of this excellent work on a subject not easy to explain, I believe it will raise a large number of questions from students of Rapanui topics. For me, since 1980, sadly I have not been able to return to the island more often than once every other year on the average, but I would like to salute with thanks the four authors of this particularly ground breaking study that will surely open new roads of investigations to increase our knowledge (or what we believe to know) of our *kainga tau*, Ko Rapa Nui.

Ivan Sergio Berto [Tekena]  
São Paulo, Brasil

<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: a second statue with knees was recorded by the University of Chile archaeological survey. It is located on the inside of the quarry, near the lake.

Dear Editor,

I have read the paper by Helene Martinsson-Wallin (RNJ 10:2) with great interest. She collected several interpretations of the eyes of the statues as a certain symbol. I should like to offer my own interpretation of the eye as the sign of the dead and ghosts. Thomas Barthel (1974:298) defined the statues as "figures of the dead ancestors"; on the other hand, the standard form, *mata* (eye, face) has an ancient variant, *matenga* (coinciding with Maori *matenga* "head"), in an oral version of the *rongo rongo* record "Apai" taken down by W.J. Thomson (Rjabchikov 1993:131-33). The word *matenga* signifies "death" in Rapanui, too. So it is safe to suggest that the *moai*'s eye as well as the *moai* itself are symbols of the other world.

Barthel, T.S. 1974. *Das achte land. Die entdeckung und besiedlung der osterinsel*. München: Klaus Renner.

Rjabchikov, S.V. 1993. Rapanuyskie teksty (k probleme rasshifrovki). *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 4:124-141).

Sergei V. Rjabchikov  
Krasnodar, Russia.

Dear Editor,

There is one theory that I have never read about or heard expressed. Simply stated, the theory is that those *moai* found some distance from the base of Rano Raraku were not transported there in a "finished" state. Let us assume that the stone

carvers and their masters realized that "walking" or pulling a carved *moai* a long distance over uneven lava-covered terrain would risk breakage and other damage to their freshly completed works of art. For that reason, long blocks of stone were cut out of the side of the volcano and lowered to the volcano's base. Once at the base of the volcano, stone cutters rounded off the corners of the block until it was perfectly round. The long round cylinder of stone was then rolled to a chose site, sometimes miles away, where it was carved into the *moai* form and erected. Any damage sustained by the stone cylinder as it was rolled would be smoothed out and removed as the *moai* was being carved. Stone rubble from the carving was carefully gathered up and brought back to the volcano and scattered about that area. The statues found at or near the base of Rano Raraku were carved in place on the side of the volcano, cut loose and erected nearby, perhaps as stern guards or other retinue of that special place. It is an interesting theory. . . and theorizing is fun, isn't it?

Keep up the good work of publishing interesting articles in RNJ.

R. T. Jones, Jr.  
Ponca City, Oklahoma

Check out the Easter Island web page at  
<http://www.netaxs.com/~trance/rapanui.html>  
or: <http://www.netaxs.com/~trance/eif.html>

Michael D. Mueller, Bookfinder & Bookseller  
Specializing in small islands, travel & exploration, natural history, Darwin, anthropology, archaeology. Can provide Easter Island books to collectors  
Currently available:

*The Norwegian Archaeological Expedition to Easter Island and the Pacific*, Volume 1 only, 1961.

Edited by Thor Heyerdahl and Edwin Ferdon, Jr.  
Volume 1: archaeology of Easter Island. A scarce book.

Regent House, Suite 401  
3201 Wisconsin Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20016  
Ph: (202) 362-9546; Fax: (202) 237-8140

### Memorial Gifts

You can honor and remember others through a Memorial Gift to the Easter Island Foundation. A Memorial Gift is a special way to pay tribute to the memory of a loved one. By providing support for the Foundation and its programs, such as scholarships for islanders, your gift can live on into posterity—and some fortunate Rapanui student can have a brighter future.

Please send Memorial Gifts to the Easter Island Foundation, Attn: Barbara Hinton,  
4928 Feagan Street, Houston, Tx 77007.